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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the new requirement under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that Individualized Education Program teams conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and implement behavior intervention plans that include positive behavioral interventions and supports for students with disabilities. It describes the purpose of a functional assessment and outlines key steps that are common to most FBAs, including: (1) verify the seriousness of the problem; (2) define the problem behavior in concrete terms; (3) collect data on possible causes of problem behavior; (4) analyze the data; and (5) formulate and test a hypothesis. The digest then addresses behavior intervention plans and the need to implement intervention plans that emphasize skills needed by the student to behave in a more appropriate manner and that provide proper motivation. Tips for evaluating the plan are also included. (CR)

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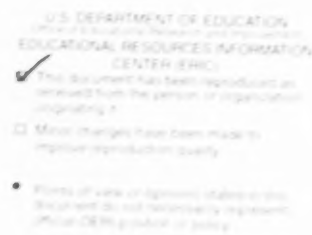
FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENT AND BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION PLANS



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Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavior Intervention Plans

Mary K. Fitzsimmons

For some time, researchers and school personnel have been studying the effects of a wide range of problem behaviors on classroom learning. Research funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and other government agencies corroborates educators' concerns that behavior difficulties interfere with the learning of both the student exhibiting the behavior problem and his or her peers.

In light of this research, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 require that understanding the relationship between learning and behavior must be a key ingredient in planning the individualized education program (IEP) for a student with disabilities. Consequently, teams charged with developing IEPs are required to address the children's behavioral as well as learning problems. IEP teams must conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and implement behavior intervention plans that include positive behavioral interventions and supports.

States are responding to these new requirements speedily. As of June 1998, 35 states and territories have current plans to develop or revise written policies and procedures or guidelines related to FBAs to be consistent with the requirements of IDEA. Some of the IDEA requirements relate to FBAs and the influence of behavior on learning. They include the following:

- IEP teams must explore the need for strategies and supports to address any behavior that may impede the learning of the child with disabilities or the learning of his or her peers.
- IEP teams must meet within 10 days of any disciplinary actions resulting in suspension or expulsion of a student with disabilities. The meeting's purpose is to plan a functional behavior assessment so data will be available for a behavior plan. If such a plan already exists, the IEP team reviews and revises it, as necessary, to ensure that it addresses the student's behavior that precipitated the disciplinary action.
- States must address the in-service needs of education personnel in the area of development and implementation of positive intervention strategies.

Why Conduct a Functional Assessment?

The purpose of a *functional assessment* is to gather information in order to understand a student's problem behavior. However, an FBA goes beyond the "symptom" (the problem behavior) to the student's underlying motivation to "escape," "avoid," or get something. OSEP and other government-sponsored research and educators' and psychologists' experience have demonstrated that behavior intervention plans stemming from the knowledge of *why* a student misbehaves (i.e., based on a functional behavioral assessment) are extremely useful in addressing a wide range of problems.

Often, the *functions* of a behavior are not inappropriate - rather, it is the behavior itself that is judged appropriate or inappropriate. If the IEP team determines through an FBA that a student is seeking attention by acting out, they can develop a plan to teach the student more appropriate ways to gain attention, thereby filling the student's need for attention with an alternative or *replacement behavior* that serves the same function as the inappropriate behavior. At the same time, strategies may be developed to decrease or even eliminate *opportunities* for the student to engage in inappropriate behavior.

Conducting a Functional Assessment

Identifying the reasons for behavior will take many forms, and while the IDEA advises an FBA approach to determine specific *contributors* to behavior, it does not require or suggest specific techniques or strategies to use when assessing that behavior. However, several key steps are common to most FBAs:

1. *Verify the seriousness of the problem.* Many classroom problems can be eliminated by the consistent application of standard and universal discipline strategies of proven effectiveness. Only when these strategies have not resulted in significant improvement on the part of the student should school personnel go forward with an FBA.

2. *Define the problem behavior in concrete terms.* School personnel need to pinpoint the behavior causing learning or discipline problems and to define that behavior in terms that are simple to measure and record. For example, a problem behavior might be "Trish is aggressive." A concrete description is "Trish hits other students during recess when she does not get her way."

3. *Collect data on possible causes of problem behavior.* The use of a variety of techniques will lead the IEP team to a better understanding of the student behavior. Key questions include the following: Is the problem behavior linked to a skill deficit? Is there evidence to

suggest that the student does not know how to perform the skill? Does the student have the skill but for some reason not perform it consistently? Also, a probing discussion with the student may yield an enhanced understanding of what, in each context, causes problem behavior.

4. *Analyze the data.* A data triangulation chart is useful in identifying possible stimulus-response patterns, predictors, maintaining consequences, and likely function(s) of the problem behavior. A problem behavior pathway chart can be used to sequentially arrange information on setting antecedents, the behavior itself, and consequences of the behavior that might lead to its maintenance.

5. *Formulate and test a hypothesis.* After analyzing the data, school personnel can establish a plausible explanation *(hypothesis)* regarding the function of the behaviors in question. This hypothesis predicts the general conditions under which the behavior is most and least likely to occur as well as the consequences that maintain it. The team can then experimentally manipulate some of the relevant conditions affecting the behavior. If the behavior remains unchanged following this environmental manipulation, the team can reexamine the hypothesis with a view to altering it.

Behavior Intervention Plans

The student's behavior intervention plan should include positive strategies, programs or curricular modifications, and supplementary aids and supports required to address the behaviors of concern. It is helpful to use the data collected during the FBA to develop the plan and to determine the discrepancy between the child's actual and expected behavior.

Intervention plans that emphasize skills needed by the student to behave in a more appropriate manner and that provide proper motivation will be more effective than plans that simply *control* behavior. Interventions based on *control* often only *suppress* the behavior, resulting in a child manifesting unaddressed needs in alternative, inappropriate ways. Positive plans for behavioral intervention, on the other hand, will address both the source of the problem and the problem itself and foster the expression of needs in appropriate ways.

Evaluating the Plan

It is good practice for IEP teams to include two evaluation procedures in an intervention plan: one procedure designed to monitor the consistency with which the management plan is implemented, the other designed to measure changes in behavior.

In addition, IEP teams must determine a timeline for implementation and reassessment and specify how much behavior change is required to meet the goal of the intervention. Assessment completion should be within the timelines prescribed by the IDEA.

If a student already has a behavior intervention plan, the IEP team may elect to review and modify it or they may determine that more information is necessary and conduct an FBA. The IDEA states that a behavior intervention plan based on an FBA should be considered when developing the IEP if a student's behavior interferes with his or her learning or the learning of classmates. To be meaningful, plans need to be reviewed at least annually and revised as often as needed. However, the plan may be reviewed and reevaluated whenever any member of the child's IEP team feels it is necessary.

Sources

This digest is based on the following sources:

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- *Functional Behavioral Assessment: State Policies and Procedures* from Project Forum at NASDSE, June 1998. Available from 703-519-3800 (voice) or 7008 (TDD).

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